

Coeur Blanc

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What if Marinette had left right after leaving her present and Adrien never saw Ladybug? How would that change events? Let's see.

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Chapter 1

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“Are you really gonna do this?” Tikki asked her Chosen.

Marinette gave her kwami what she hoped was a confident smile. “I am, Tikki, and you know what I *won't* take for an answer?”

“No,” came Nathalie’s roboticized voice through the camera.

“Okay,” Marinette fidgeted, “well, um uh, when will he be back?”

“I can't tell you,” the answering voice was polite but abrupt.

“Goodbye, young lady.” With that, the camera withdrew.

Marinette checked her phone. “But Adrien's fencing class ended 27 minutes ago! He should be back by now!”

She was beginning to panic. This wasn’t the plan! The plan was she’d give her present to Adrien, watching his eyes light up as he unwrapped a thoughtful, handmade gift. Not stymied at the gate by his father’s assistant and dismissed.

“Maybe you can give him his present tomorrow at school?” Tikki suggested.

Marinette hardened her resolve. She’d gone far too long without telling Adrien how she truly felt about him. “No. You heard what Rose said. I can't back out again. She ran to the street so she could get a better view of the mansion. “Since he's not back yet, I can go through the window!”

The kwami knew what her Chosen was planning and decided to put a stop to it. “Oh, no no no! You know it's not a good idea to use your powers for personal reasons.”

Tikki tried very hard to be a good mentor to her Ladybug and usually she thought she did a good job. But alas, the girl was in love and thus in no mood to listen to wise advice.

“I'll be quick, Tikki” she reassured her kwami, “no one will ever know!”

The little Goddess sighed, convinced this plan was going to go horribly wrong. It would all end in frustration and tears. Again.

Adrien sat behind his bodyguard. They had nearly reached home when he saw Marinette run by, carrying something in her hands. He couldn't help but smile. She was always so cute and energetic, no doubt taking something to a sick friend or a late birthday present.

“Tikki! Spots On!”

Marinette became Ladybug and easily swung herself into Adrien's open window.

She gasped as she looked around. His room was just as huge and magnificent as she remembered from the last time she'd been here. There were so many of his things scattered around for her to look at.

She shook her head to clear it. None of that mattered! She had to leave the gift and get out before she was seen. She looked around his desk, found a pencil and signed her name before leaving the present on his bed. She ran to the window, deployed her yo-yo, and was gone.

Adrien arrived home, feeling a little less triumphant at the look of disapproval on Nathalie's face. His father was of course, nowhere to be seen.

“You're very late, Adrien,” she told him.

Wow, no kidding! He dearly wanted to say but doubted she'd appreciate his inner Chat Noir. Instead, he held up the championship medal. "The awards ceremony took longer than expected. Then we gave [Kagami](#) a ride home."

He looked around in the hope his father would suddenly appear. "Will you let my father know I won?" he asked.

Nathalie's expression stayed neutral, as usual. "As soon as he's done with his work."

I suppose a "well done" or "I'm sure he's proud of you" is too much to ask for. Adrien silently trudged past her and up to his room.

Adrien opened the door to his room and went inside. It was just as cold and empty as he remembered, except for a wrapped blue package on his bed. It looked just like the gift Marinette had been carrying! Had it been for him the whole time?

He gently unwrapped it. A beret? It was a black beret with stripes in green, yellow and purple. It reminded him of his favorite shirt! Marinette had made him a beret to match his shirt. That girl was incredibly creative and clever.

He looked over the beret and his smile faded into confusion. There were two white hearts embroidered on the back, very discrete and easy to miss.

"Why would Marinette give me a beret with two hearts on it?" he asked out loud. He frowned. "And how did she even get in my room?"

If Plagg could sweat he would. Adrien was dangerously close to figuring out Marinette and Ladybug were the same person! All because the lovesick girl used her powers to sneak Adrien a gift. Really, he thought *he* was supposed to be the adorably chaotic rule breaker, not Sugar Cube. He'd expected better from her.

“Well, maybe she...” Plagg dithered but his Chosen wasn’t listening. He saw the light dawn in the boy’s eyes as he finally figured it out.

“Marinette...is in love with me.”

He thought of all the times she’d stuttered in front of him. How she struggled to speak to him.

“Oh, so you watched the show, then! Well, uh, look...about what you saw on the show last night — the totographs, in my room—

“ You mean the photographs?”

“ The grotographs, exactly! It-it's not what you think. See...I'm really into fashion, and, umm...

“ Are you lying?”

“ No! I'm so not into you—I mean, sure, I'm interested in you, but, um, not in that way; well, you know, ha-ha-ha-ha...ha ha!”

But she had been, all this time. Lying to protect herself from heartbreak if she were rejected. He had been so sure she was just star-struck because he was a celebrity but really she had been in love with him.

She’d kissed his cheek.

She’d listened to him rave about how great Kagami was, even helping him on a date.

His heart warmed as he thought of everything his good friend did for him, then drooped as he realized he’d have to turn down an awesome girl like Marinette for the second time, this time as Adrien Agreste.

Hopefully it will go better this time.

Marinette ran up to her friends, her heart beating nearly out of her chest. She'd done it! She's managed to leave a gift for Adrien *and* sign it! It was a good start and she was proud of herself.

Her hair ties had fallen out as she'd ran but she didn't care. She'd finally let Adrien know how she felt about him!

She ran closer to her friends. "Ta-da! I did it!"

Her friends gathered around her in a hug, laughing as they did so.

"I'm so proud of you." Alya told her.

"You rock!" shouted Mylene.

Rose proudly reclaimed Princess Twinklepeach from Alix, who groaned in annoyance.

"So, how did you get to Adrien?" Alya wanted to know.

Marinette blushed. There was no way she could say "I transformed and misused my powers." Tikki was already disappointed with her. "I was very...convincing?" she laughed nervously.

The girls were too busy at first congratulating their friend to notice the blond boy waiting his turn to speak.

"Marinette?"

Six pairs of eyes looked over at Adrien, who suddenly looked very nervous. He rubbed the back of his head. "I have something to tell you." He looked from her to the Girl Squad and then back at Marinette. "Alone?"

He didn't look pleased to know how she felt about him. Judging by his slumped posture and nervous expression, he had the air of someone who had to tell someone their pet hamster died but were unsure if they would be sad, angry or both.

Marinette's gut twisted and she felt cold all over. She took a deep breath and hoped her smile was reassuring. "Of course."

Alya noticed they'd walked away far enough so no one could eavesdrop on them but close by in case Marinette needed them. Smart girl.

She walked him over to a place where they wouldn't be overheard. Deep down, she already knew what he was going to say. She'd thought about it nearly constantly when she imagined what he would say when and if she were ever able to confess.

She looked up at him. He was smiling his fake model smile but his eyes were sad. This wouldn't be any easier on him than it would be on her. In a strange way, that made her feel better.

She took another deep breath and tried to steady herself. Time to get this over with.

Adrien forced himself to look her in the eyes. She deserved that much. Realizing he still had the beret in his hands, he handed it back to her.

She looked beautiful with her hair down. It framed her face and brought out her usually beautiful bluebell eyes. Her eyes reminded him of...no. He refused to think of his lady right now. Marinette deserved all of his attention.

"Marinette," he began and almost faltered when he could see the look on her face. She looked resigned, as if she knew the whole time what he was going to say, didn't want to hear it, and was forcing herself to hear it anyway. He was reminded of the disastrous family brunch he'd had at her house. He hoped he could do better this time; after all, Adrien couldn't hide behind a mask at school.

“Marinette...you’re an amazing person. You’re wonderful; kind, caring, a great class president,” he tried not to falter. “You’re so creative too! Your gaming skills are awesome, you can bake and sew and create incredible designs. You’re going to be world famous someday and all of us can brag about how we knew you when you were just starting out.”

Her expression didn’t change; she just nodded to show him she was listening.

He couldn’t tell how she was reacting to his words. Part of him wanted to run away but he knew that was selfish and cowardly. He would tell her what he came to tell her and if she needed to cry, scream, or hit him to feel better, he’d take it. She’d earned the right to be angry. He’d broken her heart. Twice.

“I just...” he longed to look away from her somber blue eyes but this was his punishment. “I don’t feel about you that way. But someone else could!” For some reason, he’d always assumed she had feelings for Luka. “You’re-you’re so pretty and sweet and smart I know there are tons of other guys out there for you! Much better for you than me...” he stopped talking because he realized how arrogant he sounded. “I’m...I’m so sorry, Marinette. I never meant to hurt you.”

But he did. And he’d done it twice. At least this time he hadn’t done it at her house in front of her parents. He hadn’t accepted their hospitality under false pretenses. No, he’d broken her heart in front of all her closest friends. *His* friends as well. Girls who had welcomed him into his class and to any events he could manage to sneak out to. He wasn’t sure which scenario was worse.

She blinked and he could see she wasn’t crying but her eyes had an almost unnatural sheen to them. “There’s someone else.”

It was a statement, not a question and he had the feeling she’d seen through his attempt to let her down easy. He would be honest with her. “Yes. There is.”

Marinette looked up at him and then braced herself. "It's..." she forced herself to speak, "...it's Kagami, isn't it?"

Kagami?

He hesitated. Yes, he and Kagami had been becoming closer lately, especially after Ladybug had continued to reject him. It was her right and although he still hoped they'd be together in the far future (they were still partners, that had to count for something) he couldn't ignore that she didn't feel the same.

Kagami...was glorious. He found himself drawn to her strength and confidence. She was brave and fierce and so very many of the things he wanted in a girl. She wasn't Ladybug, and maybe it was time he stopped comparing every girl he met to the Hero of Paris. It wasn't fair to them.

"Well..." he tried to explain, "Kagami and I...we just have so much in common. Father and her mother are friends, we fence together...study together..."

"Yeah, I get it," Marinette's smile is heartbreaking but he still won't look away. "She has your father's stamp of approval. She's of a good family, you two have tons in common...she's a good fit." She blinked again. "Kagami's my friend and...I'm happy for you. Both of you."

Adrien felt a little bit of the tension in his shoulder ease. He had Marinette's "blessing"...sorta. Maybe he should finally let Ladybug go and concentrate on a girl who wanted to be with and he could want to be with too.

"Adrien," she managed a tiny hint of a smile and for a moment he could barely breathe. She really was lovely when she wasn't tripping or stuttering. None of this was her fault. "Thank you."

He felt very confused. "For what?" *You shouldn't be thanking me.*

She chuckled and almost sounded like her old self, before heartbreak. "For talking to me and telling me how you feel. For being honest and trying to be gentle with my feelings." She held her hand over her heart and looked at him. "Now that I know how you feel, it's like I finally have closure and can finally move on."

Adrien smiled in relief and reached out, impulsively grabbing her hand. "So...you'll be okay? Even though we're not in love with each other, doesn't mean we can't be friends. Right?"

It was what she told Chat Noir, so he hoped the same would be true for Adrien.

"No!" she pulled her hand from his and backed away.

He stared at her, unsure of what to do. He'd messed up again. If she became an akuma because of her, he'd deserve it.

"No," she said again, quieter this time. "Not right away." She looked up at the surprise on his face and explained. "You see...I liked you for a long time. Longer than...longer than I've ever liked anyone. So...it's going to take me awhile longer to get over you than it would another boy."

"Sounds like you and I both need a bit of cheering up tonight."

"You? You've gotten your heart broken too?"

"Yup."

At the time Chat Noir had wondered what idiot would break the heart of a girl as awesome as Marinette. Now he realized it was him. Twice. Maybe more but this last time was permanent, even if it would heal.

"For now, Adrien..." she looked down at her feet. She would be proud of herself any other time. She was able to speak to him, have a full conversation in fact, without stuttering. It was just her luck the

only time she managed it was while getting her heart broken. At least he was trying to be gentle and kind. That didn't help as much as she thought.

"I think you should give me as much space as you can." She made herself look him in the eye. "It's going to take me a while to heal and get over you so...do your best in class. I'm sorry..." She truly was. "I just don't feel like I can be a good friend to you for a while."

He nodded. "I understand." She looked so distraught he wanted to hug her but knew he didn't have the right. "I'll go now. I'm sorry again, Marinette."

With nothing else to say, he turned and left.

Alya and the rest of the group waited until Adrien was safely out of sight. Then they rushed over and clustered around their friend. She was still clutching the beret she'd made for Adrien in her hands, staring off in the direction he'd left.

Her best friend approached the girl softly, cautiously. "Hey, Marinette? It's Alya." She touched Marinette's arm and she flinched. Pulling back Alya asked, "You okay, girl?"

Marinette seemed to have been waiting for Alya to collapse. Her face crumpled and she burst into tears. "No! Alya! Alya he-he doesn't want me!" she wailed and dropped to her knees, cuddling the beret for comfort.

They all clustered around her, trying to hug every inch of her they could.

Mylene crouched down and stroked the distraught girl's hair. "I'm sure that's not quite true," she tried to soothe her friend. "What did he say?"

“We saw him give back the beret but we just thought his old man wouldn’t let him keep it,” Alix pointed out.

Marinette shook her head. “I doubt M. Agreste even saw it. He-he told me that he thinks I’m wonderful and awesome and cool and stuff...he just doesn’t see that way.”

The girls all looked at each other, unsure of what to say. They had always known rejection was a possibility but somehow still held out hope.

Marinette continued to sob. “He-he was really nice and tried to make me feel better. But...he’s not interested in me.”

“Wait, who-” Alix tried to ask but was quickly shushed by Rose.

Marinette hesitated. “If...if I tell you, you have to promise not to get mad. She can’t help how she feels and neither can he.”

Alya stood up and adjusted her glasses. “Kagami,” she growled.

Juleka thought for a moment then shrugged. “Makes sense. They went to England and the movies together.”

“Juleka! That’s not helping!” Rose chastised her as they both looked at Marinette.

The goth girl wished she hadn’t spoken. “Sorry, Marinette,” she mumbled.

“It’s okay,” she tried to reassure them but barely seemed to be holding herself together.

“No offense, the sword is cool and all, but how can Adrien pick Kagami over Marinette?” Alix wanted to know. Mylene tried to quiet her but she pulled away and looked at Alya. “I mean...come on! Kagami’s a total ice queen. All she has going for her is Adrien’s dad wants him to date her for business reasons.”

“She can’t compare to my girl Marinette,” Alya declared loyally. “Daddy’s boy needs to wake up and see what’s in front of him before it’s gone.” She none too subtly looked Juleka in the eye, who nodded and texted her brother.

“Kagami should be ashamed of herself!” Rose squeaked angrily. “She knows how Marinette feels about Adrien. Marinette saw him first. They’re supposed to be friends! Kagami is totally violating the ‘sisters over misters’ rule! She’s breaking the Girl Code!”

“I guess...” Juleka wasn’t sure but agreed with Rose on principle.

“Ugh! With Adrien dating the Ice Queen he’ll have even less time to hang out with us. She’ll hog him all to herself,” Alix groused.

Alya snarled as she tried to hold on to her best friend. “They both need to pay for hurting you like this.”

“Man-stealer!”

Mylene tried to calm the group down. “You know, this could be good for Marinette long term. She can get over Adrien and move on to...someone new,” she also looked at Juleka. “Someone who can appreciate her.”

“Someone without a snobby dad.”

“Someone with taste!”

“Yeah!”

“Stop.”

Everyone stopped arguing and pulled away to stare at Marinette.

She was no longer crying. She’d dropped the beret, the hat she’d spent hours making and embroidering on the ground like litter.

The girl group couldn’t help gasping. “Marinette?” Mylene asked.

Alya risked putting a hand on her shoulder. "You okay, girl? Look, I know you're upset about...about what happened..."

"You mean my rejection," Marinette's laugh was a little bitter as she looked at the shock on her friends' faces. "It's okay to say it. I was rejected. Adrien likes another girl." She sighed and looked down. "I kinda knew it, you know? It just...sounded different to hear it out loud."

"Kagami..." Rose tried to say.

"...did nothing wrong." Marinette's head came up and met her gaze. Alya shivered, reminded how determined Ladybug always looked when she had a fight to win. "She didn't *steal* Adrien, he was as interested in her as she was in him. She was always honest about her intentions towards him. I have no right to be mad at either of them."

"And that includes you too!" She looked everyone in the eye and they felt like they couldn't look away. "I'm happy for them. I'm firmly on Team Adrigami and I won't hear an unkind word about either of them." She still cried but she was smiling. "At least I'm going to try to be. They deserve to be happy." She picked up the beret and walked over to a nearby trash can. Turning back to her friends she said, "and you know what? So do I."

Her friends aaahed and gathered around her again for a group hug, gentler this time and longer.

Marinette felt something bumping against her head. She opened her eyes and saw Princess Twinklepeach.

Alix smiled at her, not in the least bit embarrassed to be holding the plushie. "She needs you more than I do right now. Just give her back to Rose when you're done."

Meanwhile in a nearby mansion a man dressed as a gimp felt a surge of negative emotion bloom and then die before he could send an akuma. Sighing, he decided to give up and detransform. There was always tomorrow.

The weekend was relatively quiet but the fallout on Monday morning at school was nuclear. Even students from other classes gave Adrien curious or nearly hostile glances as he walked into school. At first he was confused but he quickly caught on as he remembered Saturday's events. He wanted to crawl into a hole and hide for a month until the situation blew over.

"Dude! What did you *do* ?!"

Nino met him on the front steps, looking at him with a mixture of horror and awe. Other students passed by on the way to class. Adrien was sure someone tried to kick him. Nino noticed and asked, "how did you go from top model to *persona non grata* around here?"

Adrien rubbed the back of his neck. "Marienette...told me she had feelings for me..."

Nino adjusted his headphones then stared at his best friend. "Wait, really? Dude...it's about time!" He laughed and then saw the look on his friend's face. "Uh oh...you rejected her, didn't you?"

"I tried to let her down easy-" Adrien broke off and stared. "You *knew* ? You knew and you didn't tell me? Warn me?"

Nino took off his hat and less than gently hit his best friend with it.

"Ow!" Adrien rubbed his head. "What was that for?"

"Are you serious?!" Nino rolled his eyes. "Dude... *everyone* in class knew she had a crush on you. Even Bustier. We were even taking bets on how long it would take you to notice."

“Wait, what?” Adrien asked.

Nino just shook his head. “The girls were pretty firmly invested in Team Adrienette. They had all sorts of crazy schemes to help her.” He sighed. “But you went and broke her heart.” He patted his friend on the shoulder. “Nice knowing ya, dude.”

Walking into the classroom was even worse than the courtyard because the rage and hurt and disappointment was perfectly distilled into one room. No one would even look at him except for Lila and Max. Most everyone else was hostile or confused. Marinette refused to look at him and Alya looked ready to throw hands if he as much as waved.

Chloe was wailing loudly and accepting tissues from a sympathetic Sabrina. Chloe turned her back on him but continued to talk dramatically to her best friend.

“How could he, Sabrina? I mean, I could see him rejecting Dupain-Cheng, but why me? Why Tsurugi? I’m perfect!” She continued to cry.

“He’s clearly an idiot for not seeing what’s right in front of him,” Sabrina consoled her friend.

“Clearly,” Chloe sniffed. She glared at Adrien with red eyes. “Don’t talk to me, you traitor.”

Adrien looked at Nino, who shrugged and walked to his seat. He spent the rest of the day ignoring the girls who sat behind him.

Up near the back of the class Lila seethed as everyone ignored her. Even a new Prince Ali story did nothing to turn their attention away from the relationship drama in the front. Adrien was officially dating Kagami Tsurugi! There were no lies she could think of to discredit her because she didn’t attend their school, her family was rich and

powerful and worst of all, M. Agreste approved of her! Adrien was clearly a dead end.

What made it worse is nearly everyone in school was talking about Marinette's rejection and how Adrien was awful for turning down such a great person. Marinette's popularity went far beyond the classroom, farther than her own! Anything she said against the other girl now would just make Lila look bad and Marinette gain more sympathy.

She slumped over her desk. *Damn I can't claim she's jealous of me now, she has no reason.* She hid a glare behind her bangs. *And she's throwing all her support on Kagami's behalf. Time to cut my losses.*

*It's **Marinette** who should be moping and feeling bad, not this spoiled kitten.* Plagg thought as he hid from his Wielder in a desk drawer. His poor little Sugar Cube no doubt had her paws full trying to keep the girl from drowning in tears and depression. And possibly cookies.

Logically, he knew Adrien was right to reject her. It was kinder to the girl in the long run to know where she stood. Plagg was wise enough to know her heart would heal and she would move on. She would find love with someone who could appreciate her, break up, fall in love and do the whole dance all over again.

It still ticked him off to see Adrien lying on his bed and sighing like he was the one who was turned down. With *his* closest friends only a few meters away so they could watch someone tear him apart as gently as possible. At least Ladybug's rejections when he told her he was in love with her were always private.

He peered out and looked at the boy. As usual Gabriel was a deadbeat dad and Nathalie was practically his shadow so as usual it was his job to cheer up his Wielder. That, or kick him in the ass.

Mage above, he couldn't wait for the kids to unmask in front of each other. He imagined the look on the boy's face when he saw who he turned down. Well, Marinette would too, but by then she'd probably have moved on to someone more available. His romantic nerd would probably still be carrying a small torch.

Giving up, he flew over and tugged at the sheets. "So are you going to move sometime this afternoon, or do you want a few more days to wallow in self-pity?"

Adrien groaned and buried his face in his pillows. "Not now, Plagg. I'm feeling very guilty at the moment."

"Oh, right. Sorry." Plagg flew over to the desk, grabbed a pencil and flew back to drop it on his Wielder's head. "I forgot. Poor Marinette is crying her eyes out, feeling like her world is ending but the important thing to take away from the past few days is *you* feel bad about it." He huffed and crossed his paws. "I'm ever so glad you're using her misery to learn an important life lesson."

Adrien groaned again and sat up. "Give me a break, Plagg." He thought for a moment and looked up at his kwami, eyes narrowed. "Since when do you care about people other than me?"

"Since you started going to school with the daughter of the best bakers in Paris of course," Plagg countered. *And she's Ladybug and is partnered with my Sugar Cube. Tikki **loves** her so she has to be pretty special.* "Plus, I've seen her in class a few times. She's a pretty likeable human." He glared at the boy. "I may live half the time in your bag but I'm not blind or oblivious."

Adrien heard the dig and knew he deserved it. "Look, Plagg, it wouldn't have been fair to Marinette to keep on being in love with me when I didn't feel the same about her." He tried to explain himself. "She could have almost anyone she wanted. She's amazing," he shrugged. "I'm sure she'll be dating a great guy in no time. Someone like Luka." He muttered to himself. "To be honest I thought she was already dating Luka."

Plagg flew closer to his face. "And will that make you feel less guilty?"

He shrugged at his kwami. "Maybe?" His eyes implored the little creature. "You've lived a long time with different heroes. What would they do to help a friend they've hurt?"

Plagg shrugged back. "Depends on who they were. Herakles would have offered to wrestle until the friend felt better. Hei Mao would play games. Everyone responds differently." He pinned Adrien to the bed with a glare. "But neither of those were when they hurt someone who cared about them so in your case, you need to back off and leave her alone until she tells you otherwise. She said she needed space. So maybe now you can listen to what a girl tells you."

"But that's not good enough, Plagg!" Adrien shot up and began to pace. "I have to do something. I have to make things better!" He looked out the window then back at his kwami. "Did you see the way everyone looked at me? I thought they were going to eat me alive."

That was it.

Plagg punched his Wielder in the nose.

"Ow!" Adrien rubbed his sore face. He was lucky Plagg couldn't hit hard but it still hurt. "What was that for?"

Plagg pinched him just because he could, taking pleasure in watching the boy wince. "Is that what's important to you? How do you look in public? Do you have any empathy, kid?" He felt oddly disappointed in his kitten. "Imagine being publicly rejected. Imagine having to see your face everywhere she goes because you're all over town." He crossed his nubs. "Now imagine having to go to school all day hearing people talk about you, feeling sorry for you, like you're pitiful or something." He huffed. "And all you can think about is yourself and how you feel." He pointed to his tiny chest. "Yeah, *I'm* selfish but at least I'm honest about it."

Adrien slumped. "You're right. I'm sorry." He seemed to withdraw into himself. "I'll leave her alone until she's ready to talk to me again."

"Good. You're finally making sense," Plagg approved. He hovered near his Wielder's shoulder. "You were right to be honest with Marinette about her feelings. It wouldn't have been worse in the long run to leave her hanging. But you're not obligated to like someone back just because they like you." Plagg thought about what he'd just said. "That's also excellent advice for your situation with Ladybug! In the meantime, you need to finally accept your partner isn't interested in anything but friendship and move on."

The boy's face scrunched up with anguish and for an uncomfortable minute the kwami thought his Chosen would go on another hour long rant about how Ladybug was his true love, that she was just being stubborn and would see for herself one day. That they were still partners in the future had to mean something and blah blah blah...

"You're not meant to be a couple if only one of you wants to be, kid," Plagg told him kindly. "Getting angry at her for rejecting you or blaming her for how she feels isn't fair. If something happens between you someday, it'll be because you've built up a relationship, not because you think it's destiny and she had no choice."

All the fight went out of Adrien and he sagged in defeat. "You're right, Plagg," he slumped down on his couch. "After all, I barely know her. I can't be really in love with someone I barely know."

"You can't know each other. For your own safety," Plagg reminded him.

Adrien nodded, face solemn. Then he brightened. "But *Kagami* likes me!" he remembered. "We share the same interests. I can talk to her about the pressures of my life and Father likes her!"

Plagg tried not to sigh. One step forward, five steps back. "That's not a stable foundation for a relationship," he grumbled. *Sounds like he*

*never even **considered** Marinette as a possible girlfriend but I think she's better off without him. At least until he grows the hell up.*

"But it's a start!" He wasn't going to let his grumpy kwami stop him. "Sure, everyone thinks we're dating and I think it's a good idea to let our parents think that so they'll let us spend more time together."

"Wait a minute-" Plagg began.

Adrien held up a hand to stop him. "But I'll tell Kagami the truth; that for now I just want to be her friend and let our relationship go from there. If there's no spark, it's no one's fault, but if nothing else we'll both get someone we can be ourselves around."

Plagg looked into the kid's hopeful face and couldn't bring himself to crush him. "It's a start," he conceded.

After school Marinette called out a quick hello to her parents and then trudged up the stairs to her room. She made sure her trapdoor was firmly closed before collapsing onto her bed and cuddling her cat pillow for comfort.

Tikki floated above her, dithering hither and yon. It had been some time since her Wielder had any sort of love problems. Most of her more recent Wielders had avoided romantic relationships altogether until they surrendered their Miraculous. Seeing her poor baby bug cry her heart out made her think being single might be the best course of action for now.

Marinette sobbed, nose red and eyes swollen. "I thought I'd cried all the tears I'd needed this weekend, Tikki." Her blubbering was inelegant but heartfelt. "I thought," she began to gesture. "I thought 'oh...it's been a few days to get used to the fact he's not interested. Well, it'll be okay. We'll be friends again and now at least I know now.' That's better than wondering, right?" She spoke to her kwami but she really didn't expect an answer.

Marinette pulled her cat pillow a little closer. Its smiling face reminded her a little of Chat Noir and she was sure if he were there right now he'd probably tell her some boring old model wasn't nearly good enough for her and she was awesome.

"I mean, no more stupid plans to catch his attention. No more stuttering and stammering when I try to talk to him." She rubbed the pillow on her cheek. "No more following him or acting like a crazy girl and dragging my friends into my weird plans." Tears fell down her cheeks. "I'll finally be able to interact with him like a normal person. No guy is worth humiliating yourself for him or hurting another girl because you're jealous of her."

"Marinette..." Tikki wanted to comfort the girl but she would also be doing her a disservice by lying. She gently lay down on her Wielder's head. "Marinette, I'm so sorry you're hurting right now."

"Thank you, Tikki," she whispered.

She thought her Wielder could use a little Tough Love, but gently. "I know right now he feels like your whole world and it's ended," she could feel the girl nod. "But it hasn't and it won't. Your heart will heal and you'll rebuild your world. Take all the time you need to heal."

"Tikki," she sniffled, "I love him,"

The kwami sighed. "No, Marinette. You don't."

Marinette stopped crying and looked up at her in surprise. "But...yes I do,"

"Marinette," Tikki's eyes were filled with wisdom and compassion but she knew she had to be firm. "What you felt for Adrien was infatuation. You like him a lot and you're attracted to him but this love...it came on suddenly and strongly, didn't it?"

Eyes wide, she nodded.

Tikki began to explain. "That's not real love. That's infatuation. It's a sudden strong love, almost like an obsession. It was like a clap of thunder, out of nowhere, remember? You didn't even like him until he apologized and gave you his umbrella, remember?"

Marinette blushed and nodded.

"Real love is longer, slower. It's the kind of deep feeling that can come from knowing someone a long time and being close to them."

Tikki smiled as she remembered her eons-long relationship.

"Sometimes you'll argue. Sometimes they're your best friend. It might not be as exciting as a bolt out of the blue, but it can be very rewarding."

"Love takes time and love takes work," Marinette quoted Garnet from *Steven Universe*.

Tikki giggled. "That's not a bad way to put it." She wiped what she could of her Wielder's face. "I think the best kind of love is when you get to know a person before you fall in love. Maybe even start as friends. Many of my previous were friends and never even considered falling in love with a best friend or a comrade-in-arms, but those were always the strongest relationships." She smoothed Marinette's hair out of her face. "Take your time. You're still so young and have plenty of time to fall in love." It's good for you to take time for yourself."

Marinette looked at Tikki and sniffed once again. "I...didn't really know him all that well before I fell in love with him, did I?"

"No," Tikki's tone was gentle.

The girl sat up and looked around her room. Her heart still clinched when she saw Adrien's model perfect face staring down at her but it didn't wound her. She wouldn't die of a broken heart. She was stronger than that.

“You know, Tikki,” she began, “I think I should take down some of his pictures. Not all of them, just the model shots,” she explained. She started to rip a few on the wall above her bed. “It’s past time I start to redecorate.”

“Great idea, Marinette!” Seeing all these pictures would just continue to hurt her chosen so it was good she was weaning herself off the boy’s face. She tried to pull down a photo and it tore halfway. “Um...I might leave the heavy lifting to you.”

Marinette chuckled for the first time in days. “Yeah. Good idea.” She got most of the larger pictures and began to throw them on the floor. She left the modeling photos for the hat she made and a cover from his very first shoot. They were good references.

“I also think I should save maybe three or four of the gifts I made him,” she told Tikki. “Then sell or donate the rest. Then I’m going to change my desktop. After that I’ll still see him at school but for a quick hello or goodbye I won’t have to talk to him. Unless we’re grouped together for a class project. Then I’m sure Chloe would be glad to switch with me. No, she’s not talking to him either. Maybe Max-”

The girl had leaned a little too far over to reach a far picture and tumbled off the bed.

“Quoi!”

“Mari-” Tikki wanted to call out to her Chosen but she sensed someone else in the room. She covered her mouth with her paws and phased quickly to hide.

Instead of the hard floor Marinette found herself cradled tenderly in the arms of Luka Couffaine.

She felt her whole body blush as she stared up into his calm blue eyes. She wondered if she was staring up at him like a brainless

idiot. Judging by his knowing smile, she probably was.

Marinette scrambled madly out of his arms and stood up straight. She smiled at him nervously as she played with her pigtails.

“Luka!” her voice was high and nervous. “So good to see you! Um, did you have a delivery in the area?”

He smiled and showed her his phone. “Juleka texted me. She asked me to come see you after work because you weren’t doing too well.”

Marinette slumped as she remembered the events of the past week and her rejection by Adrien. It made her feel bad all over again. She glanced up at Luka from under her lashes and remembered the beautiful love confessions he made to her at the studio. That made her feel even worse.

Luka saw how her music was sad and off-key and knew what to do about it. He held out his arms. “I would like to give you a hug, if you don’t mind.”

Marinette nodded. “I would love a hug from you, Luka.”

He wrapped his arms around her back and held her close. She wrapped her arms around his waist and laid her head against his chest. She could feel his slow steady heartbeat and felt comforted by it. He smelled nice; not like a fancy cologne but cooking spices and a faint whiff of the Seine.

She was worried she’d cry around Luka and make a fool of herself but she didn’t. She was at peace in his arms, as silly as sounded. It wasn’t the *coup de foudre* falling for Adrien had been but she felt like she could be herself and draw strength from his presence if she needed it.

He drew away from her and it was all she could do not to pull him back. She didn’t want that feeling of peace to leave her.

“Thank you, Luka,” she smiled up at him as she felt a tension she didn’t know she had left her body. “I needed that.”

He smiled. “No offense but I could tell.” He looked her over as if checking her for injuries. “Do you...need to talk?” He didn’t *want* to hear all about M. Wonderful and how he threw away something precious but he also understood the need to talk things out.

Marinette shook her head rapidly. “No! No...I’ve done more than enough talking about him. And my feelings. And how stupid I’ve been over him.”

“Your feelings are never stupid, Marinette,” he reassured her. There was a part of him that was glad she was finally trying to get over the guy but he hated the idea of her being hurt, even temporarily. Adrien was a nice guy but dense as lead.

He was sure his mother would urge him to begin an all out assault for Marinette’s heart and if he was honest with himself (and he was) he wanted to as well. She wasn’t ready and he respected her enough to wait.

Her smile was small but it lit up her whole face and he couldn’t look away from it. He wanted to stare at it forever but he doubted her parents would appreciate that.

She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. “Thank you for saying that, Luka. You’re the sweetest, coolest, kindest, most talented boy I know.”

That sounded promising. “...but...?”

“But...” Marinette took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “But. I’m recovering from heartbreak.” She laughed at herself and looked up at him. “Overly dramatic, I know. But I need time. And before you ask-” she held up a finger against his lips. “-I don’t know how long or when I’ll be over him. But I don’t want to jump into some relationship just because I’m hurting and want to move on just to feel better.” She

put a hand on his chest, eye pleading. "I don't know when, or who, if anyone and I don't want you waiting around for me thinking I can fall in love on purpose, don't." The thought of seeing Luka in love with someone else made her both happy and sad. "If someone comes along who could love you, you should go for it. " She gave into the impulse to wrap her arm around his waist again. "You deserve to be happy."

Luka tried not to look as shocked as he felt. She really thought he'd leave her? No. Not unless she asked him to.

He leaned in and kissed her cheek. Her skin was soft and warm and he couldn't help but wonder how her lips might feel. Then he chastised himself for being a greedy pirate. "So do you, Marinette. You deserve someone who loves you and wants to be with you. If not me, then someone extraordinary." It killed him only a little to say that out loud.

They looked at each other, smiling, for several minutes until they realized what they were doing and looked away.

Luka cleared his throat. "So, uh...I had another reason for coming over."

That made her curious and glad for a change of subject. "Oh?"

"Yeah," the usually self-assured teen looked nervous. "In about a month and a half is my mom's birthday and I wanted a special party dress for her. Something festive but easy to move in..."

"Something that wouldn't look out of place on a ship!" Marinette rushed over to her desk and grabbed a sketchbook and pencil. Luka smiled. Her eyes were alight, her cheeks pink and she glowed with energy. Just the way he loved to see her most.

She sketched for a bit then gave Luka a sheepish grin. "Oh, um...what are you mom's favorite colors?"

“All of them,” he smiled at the look on her face as she calculated the possibilities. “I can play while you work if it would help.” He looked down at his Jagged Stone t-shirt. “I don’t know much about fashion but music helps *me* create.”

She cheered and did a cute little kicky dance with her feet. “That would be perfect! Thank you, Luka!”

“He stood up and headed downstairs. “I’ll go get my guitar.”

By Tuesday morning Monday’s rage had gone from simmering just below the surface to whipped up into a frenzy. Adrien, already feeling guilty and no longer seen as a person had to be escorted into class by his bodyguard. The huge man glared at the other students and motioned them to behave. Nino guarded his best friend as best he could but he was risking one of two things; either risking his girlfriend’s wrath or violating the Bro Code. He hoped no one would make him choose.

The anger was being subtly influenced by Lila of course. A word in an ear here, being “accidentally” overheard there. She might not be able to have Adrien for herself but she could leave a lovely scorched earth behind her. She didn’t even care if M. Agreste pulled him out of school if he was of no use to her. That this would also hurt Marinette still raw emotions was icing.

Hawkmoth would have a field day.

Nino tried to shield his best bud behind him but Adrien wanted to be brave and face his angry classmates. “Um...morning guys!”

Chloe barely looked up from her nails. “Oh, it’s the traitor and the only person still talking to him. Backstab any childhood friends lately?”

Adrien was taken aback, not used to people attacking or hating him. “Chloe, I-”

Sweet, tiny Rose stood up and slammed her hands on her desk and outright glared at him. "I hope you and your little man stealer Kagami will be very happy together."

"Um...thanks?" he answered timidly as he rubbed the back of his neck nervously.

"If you can be happy while Marinette is crying her eyes out and trying to piece her broken heart back together I mean," Rose finished and sat down.

Adrien had no idea what to say, no prepared statement, no back-up. Except Nino and he wouldn't ask his best friend to take the fall with him. He was frozen with his tongue stuck to the bottom of his mouth and no idea how to get himself out of this situation.

He looked around in a panic and heard angry mutterings all around him. Marinette wasn't here yet and neither was Mlle. Bustier. He hoped one of them would arrive soon to settle the class down before someone, maybe more than one, attracted an akuma.

Why am I always looking for the women in my life to save me?

Lila tried to look disappointed in Adrien but she could barely contain her glee. This was almost as good as if she'd turned the entire class against Marinette! Oh, they hated their pretty little Sunshine Boy right now. Maybe after the inevitable akuma she'd find Adrien alone and hear him out. A sympathetic ear when everyone was against him would mean a lot to a goody-goody like him. Maybe she had a way to get him after all, drive a wedge between him and the fencer.

"Maybe he's not so nice after all," Nathaniel mumbled.

"And we threw a party for him and everything," Ivan growled.

No. This wasn't good. He hoped he could sneak away and transform before the akuma showed up. Maybe he could fake sick and run off.

“That’s enough.”

Alya and Marinette stood in the doorway. The reporter looked like her usual self but Marinette...

Wow.

She had changed. There were no cute flowers or pink in sight. Marinette wore a new bright red blazer with a cute black bralette top, showing off her well-defined collarbone. She’d traded in her usual capris for black skinny jeans and her ballet flats were replaced with black ankle boots. The pigtails were gone. Marinette wore her hair in a high ponytail with a decorative comb. All the girls recognized it. Kagami had given it to her as a sign of friendship. Their class president was letting everyone know where she stood.

She strode forward, looking confident and in control, even with a room full of chaos and classmates seconds away from drawing blood. She looked stern, commanding...

Like Ladybug. Or Kagami.

I really have a type, don’t I?

“I thought we discussed this yesterday and I was hoping we’d never have to discuss this again.” She caught everyone’s eye and they all looked away. Even Chloe and Lila couldn’t meet her angry gaze. The look in her eyes was calm and terrifying.

Marinette raised her eyes to the ceiling and took a deep breath as if readying herself for an unpleasant task. She looked around again.

“I heard a lot of gossip and...speculation...I guess about what’s been going on,” she might have looked at Lila. “So I’m going to be clear. And if you didn’t hear this directly from my mouth, don’t believe it until you talk to me.”

Alya tried to keep her mouth from gaping while she watched her timid best friend pace slowly in front of her now intimidated classmates. There was no stuttering or clumsiness. Even Chloe couldn't think of anything nasty to say to her. She rarely saw the other girl like this, not unless there was only an hour to go before having a project done and people were goofing off.

Marinette continued. "You know...it's kinda messed up that you're all giving Adrien a hard time for things that are really no one's fault."

"But we were just looking out for you!" Mylene protested and some people murmured in agreement.

"And I appreciate that but I didn't need you to start a mob on my behalf," Marinette countered. She hoped what she was trying to say sunk in this time. "Look, Adrien never meant to hurt me and would have avoided it if he could. But he was honest. It hurts but I'll be okay. Besides, I like Kagami. I fully support their relationship and it's kind of hypocritical if you say you'll support a friend except when they're dating someone you don't like as much." Most everyone looked ashamed and they should.

"Everyone. Look at me." Her voice was gentle but firm and they obeyed her without thinking.

"We're all going to be okay." She sounded like she could make it happen just by saying the words. "We're all going to be friends again. Stop treating Adrien like he did something horrible. No one has to like someone else just because that person has feelings for them. "

Alix and Kim looked like they still wanted to protest but Marinette shut them down. "No. This isn't a debate. You're not going to change anything by arguing. It's over."

Her words sounded final and they had no choice but to accept.

She walked towards her desk, Alya trailing behind her. She stopped and looked at Adrien. He opened his mouth to apologize again and she shook her head. His mouth closed with a snap.

“Just so you know,” she looked him in the eye, unwavering. “Kagami and I have our usual Wednesday juice date so she won’t be at fencing practice. Make sure you tell M. D’Argencourt as usual. He still forgets.”

Adrien nodded and Marinette looked satisfied as she took her seat beside Alya.

The bell rang and Mlle. Bustier arrived in class. “Good morning.” She looked at Marinette with surprise. “Marinette! That new outfit is spectacular!” The attractive teacher smiled in admiration at her student’s creativity.

Marinette sat up a little straighter at her desk. “Yeah. I just felt like I was wearing the same outfit forever. I wanted a change. So I made a brand-new Marinette original.” Her proud smile was almost genuine. “You can commission me on my website if you ever want to change up your style.”

Bustier’s smile was a little speculative. “I might take you up on that.”

Class began and while the previous tension hadn’t left, it had at least lessened. Nino and Adrien took several well-needed deep breaths to relax.

“Hey, girl? You okay?” Alya whispered as Bustier discussed Sartre.

Marinette grinned as she thought of all the soul-searching she’d done. She thought of her newly clean walls and new projects. Of Luka’s smile. Her future and her place in it.

“I will be,” she whispered back.

A universe away, Bunnix carefully examined a time window. Whatever disruption that had occurred had been resolved without her intervention and the time stream healed itself.

She reached into her pocket and pulled something out. Princess Twinklepeach was still there, looking cuddly and sweet.

The time streamer couldn't help a tiny sigh of relief. "And this is why you're the best, Mini-Bug," she grinned.
